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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 002482

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: ALASANIA SPEAKS BUT SAYS LITTLE
REF: TBILISI 2268

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In his first public statement since his resignation, former Georgian Ambassador to the UN and newest opposition figure, Irakli Alasania, addressed the Georgian media on December 24th. His long anticipated "announcement" consisted largely of common opposition criticisms of President Saakashvili. Alasania largely avoided elaborating on concrete policy differences between himself and the Saakashvili government he is leaving, and also stayed away from discussing in detail his future political plans and alliances. Alasania called for new elections; said he was consulting with various opposition figures but declined specifics; and blamed Saakashvili for not avoiding the August war. Interestingly, Alasania was much more cautious in his private remarks to the Ambassador, acknowledging that Russia was not blameless in the August conflict and that we was carefully considering his options. Alasania then quickly left for the United States to wrap up his affairs and is planning to return to Tbilisi in January. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: Alasania's much anticipated announcement was a bit underwhelming and quickly faded from news coverage. Although Alasania has extensive international experience and a rising political future; the handling of his first public appearance and nature of his remarks indicate he is still a novice in the political arena. His comments appear to be another iteration in the long history of new opposition figures delivering a familiar message hoping the problem has not been the message, but rather, the previous messengers. Alasania's remarks placed him firmly in the non-parliamentary opposition's rhetorical camp, though he was very careful not to tie himself to any particular opposition figure. Alasania is still being courted by many; however, his options have not broadened since December. Alasania's general popularity will only carry him so far, eventually the reality of being in the opposition will force him to decide whether to lead, follow, or get out of the way. End Comment.

LONG AWAITED PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT FAILS TO DELIVER

¶3. (C) Alasania delivered vague comments about his political views and future intentions at a news conference in Tbilisi on December 24th. Alasania explained that he decided to resign because of a "fundamental difference in views" with President Saakashvili. His first public remarks since declaring himself opposition, did however place Alasania firmly in the court of the non-parliamentary radical opposition. The most notable moment was when Alasania sharply criticized Saakashvili, saying he fell into Russia's trap and accused the president of engaging Georgia in "this provocative war". Overall, Alasania presented a fairly nuanced message on the war and its build up focusing mainly on the lack of interagency coordination and institutional policy apparatus to deal with developments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia but his criticism of Saakashvili dominated the headlines.

¶4. (C) Alasania called for greater transparency, and a new

focus on civil rights and fundamental freedoms. Alasania also criticized the government for an absence of an economic strategy. He used the press conference to lay out a laundry list of criticisms of the Government but did not discuss any major policy disagreements he has with the current administration. Alasania repeated a call for new elections though did not specify whether he preferred Presidential or Parliamentary elections, only saying early elections "should be held as soon as possible". Alasania's packed press conference failed to generate any subsequent debate or press coverage other than a denouncement by Labor Party Leader Shalva Natelashvili who called Alasania part of an (unspecified) American project.

WHILE RADICAL IN PUBLIC, FAR MORE CAUTIOUS IN PRIVATE

15. (C) While Alasania expressed more critical views publicly, he adopted a more cautious tone in a private lunch with the P-4 Ambassadors. In his public statements Alasania directly blamed Saakashvili for the war, something many Georgian see as playing into the Russians hands and expresses a view that does not necessarily square with public opinion. (Embassy Note: According to a new NDI poll conducted in November and reported septel, 47% of Georgian's polled think the war could have been avoided against 23% who said it could not have. However, 59% said Russia started the war compared to 11% who feel Georgia did, and 43% rated Saakashvili's performance during the war as good or very good versus 15% who said poor or very poor with 26% viewing his performance as adequate. End Note) However, in private he told the Ambassador the Russians were not blameless in the conflict - a message that would have much more resonance among the

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Georgian population, but that could be seen as supporting the current government. Alasania's immediate calls for pre-term elections also do not conform with public preferences. Recent polling (septel) has shown once again that the Georgian people do not want early elections.

WHERE WILL HE LAND, NOBODY KNOWS

16. (C) Alasania refused to engage questions on what cooperation he will have with various opposition figures. When asked if he planned to set up a separate political party, Alasania said there were already too many parties. He said the most important issue is to consolidate all the "healthy political forces". Again, Alasania would not elaborate on who the "healthy political forces" were but said he would cooperate with all the groups that share his view on the need to change the philosophy of the decision-making process. Asked specifically about Nino Burjanadze, Alasania repeated that he was having discussions with various parties adding that he respects her and will hold consultations with her as well.

17. (C) Alasania spent most of his time in Tbilisi meeting with various opposition leaders and friends inside and outside the government. After making the jump to the opposition, Alasania has been widely courted by opposition members under different terms and conditions. Alasania appears reluctant to start his own party; remains still leery of taking up David Usupashvili and David Gamkrelidze's offer to lead their joint party; and is unwilling to be a number two to Nino Burjanadze or Zurab Noghaideli. With snap pre-term elections doubtful making his chances to win elective office in the near term unlikely, Alasania might ultimately decide that waiting a year or two to see what unfolds politically before making any commitments is the best course of action.

TEFFT